

One Page Concept Review: Setting

What is it?

Setting includes several closely related aspects of a work of fiction. First, setting is the physical, sensuous world of the work; second, it is the time in which the action of the work takes place. Third, it is the social environment of the characters: the manners, customs, and moral values that govern the characters' society.

Why should I care?

Setting is often used by authors to develop the conflict. In more literary fiction (of the sort typically studied in English classes), it is *usually* used this way. By this, I simply mean that literary characters commonly struggle to overcome problems inherent in their surroundings (most commonly, the prevailing notions of one's proper place in the world and/or the cultural assumptions that one has been socialized to believe). At the very least, understanding the contexts of a literary work helps to frame one's understanding of the issues developed in that text. While it's an exaggeration to say, "All text is context," it isn't much of one. This is one of the reasons why I've tried to make setting (especially social contexts) a priority in this class, and the AP test seems to agree with me regarding this concept's centrality to literature: about half of the Q3 prompts since 1970.

How do I do it?

- **Do not oversimplify.** Often the setting is not monolithic. For example, different characters may behave differently in different contexts, and different types of characters may behave differently in different contexts.
- **You will probably want to measure setting to the degree that it is developing conflict.** If your essay is mostly a summary of interesting information about the time and place in which the text occurs, something has gone dreadfully wrong. Remember, the focus should always be *Why is this literary device being used?* Developing a conflict is simply the most obvious application of discussing setting.
- **Social settings are probably going to be most relevant.** It's not that time and place are not important, but you will probably have a lot more to write about if your focus is on social norms.
- **Do not try to do everything in timed writings.** In a forty minute essay you're probably not going to be able to adequately address, locale, time, and social settings in depth. Choose a focus and narrow appropriately.
- **Consider using the introduction to set up specific ideas regarding the setting.** This is particularly relevant advice if setting is going to be the focus of your essay.

How do students screw this up?

Not Using the Writing to Teach the Context

- **If there is a particular context that makes sense of the narrative, it is your job to teach it to the reader.** For example, if you're writing about a 19th century setting and want to discuss the ways that a female character conforms to or diverges from gender norms, you can't just drop the phrase "angel in the house" and think that your work is done. You have to have to set this idea up by explaining how the gender norm worked. Here's a *Great Expectations* example:

Dickens uses to Miss Havisham-- an older, wealthy, unmarried heiress-- to illustrate the dangers of failing to conform to prevailing Victorian gender norms. *The contemporary middle class standard, encapsulated in the ideal of the "angel in the house," was that a woman's proper role was supposed to be a supportive one in the household, primarily engaged in childrearing and domestic duties. Men, not women, were supposed to be the active agents in society, while women inspired this male action through their goodness, sexual purity, and self-sacrifice.* Thus, Miss Havisham subverts these social expectations by ... [introduces broad idea] For example, ... [introduces and analyzes specific example] In this way, Dickens portrays her as a villainous character, since she embodies everything that a woman should not be by the standards of the time. This can also be seen when ... [begins discussion of second example and analysis, etc.]

By contrast, Biddy embodies everything that an ideal Victorian woman should aspire to be ...

- **If you use some kind of jargon or a catch-phrase, it is your job to explain what you're talking about.** Do not assume the reader knows it already. If you're writing about *Yerma*, for instance, to talk about "angels of the hearth" is meaningless unless you also add "a contemporary idea that a woman's proper place was located in the home, reserving more active roles in society for men." This only takes thirty seconds of your life to add this, and it immeasurably clarifies your point for the reader.
- **Add qualifying phrases and be attentive to verb tenses.** All I mean by this is to remember that any contexts that you develop needs to be limited to the time and place to which they are appropriate. For example, "The Angel in the House" is a 19th century social norm for women. If you write about it, do it in such a way that makes clear that this was a cultural norm *for English and American women at that time*. In the same way, when discussing it, your verb tenses should all be in *past tense*, since this is no longer a social expectation for women in either country.
- **Make very clear to what extent the author is supportive or critical of a social setting.** Dickens largely buys into 19th century social norms for women. Austen is partially critical. Brontë is even more critical. Hardy is most critical of all. It is very, very important that not only do you understand these sorts of things, but that the reader does as well (since the point of the essay is to communicate your understanding of things to the reader).

Not Knowing What You're Talking About

- **Superficial or incomplete understanding of an idea leads to a time crunch.** Building the context for an idea can usually be done in a sentence or two. This should take all of a minute or so of your time. If you don't quite remember the context, however, it can take much longer, leading to rambling explanations that take up too much of the paragraph (as you attempt to piece together half-remembered ideas on the fly) or spending way too much time producing the set-up (trading off with time spent in discussing the work). If you actually know what you're talking about, these common problems largely disappear.
- **If you can't write about an idea without making factual errors, write about something else.** You had your chance to learn these things, and if you didn't bother to prepare for the test, accept that you've limited your options and must now write about what you *do* know and understand.
- **Consider generating your own setting review sheets.** Each of the magical realism novels has its own particular social and historical context, and the second research packet is specifically designed to build some of this knowledge. It would help to clarify your thinking immeasurably if you'd synthesize the ideas into a one page review. The same applies for the summer reading novels. The more work you do before the test, the more smoothly things will go on test day.